

Play with Words——Palindrome: a Method to Make English Vocabulary-learning Interesting

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Abstract

It is commonly believed that one of the unpopular English courses is vocabulary course, because the content is boring, the classroom atmosphere is dull and the students' enthusiasm is low. Moreover some people think that English vocabulary course is unnecessary and it should only be learned by students themselves. Worse still, some teachers just give up the teaching of vocabulary for they think vocabulary lesson is to recite words and that is the students' business.

But in fact, it is not right, because teacher's guidance in students' learning is crucial, and the teaching of vocabulary is important for students' language competence. English vocabulary learning belongs to the category of basic knowledge, and the basic knowledge of students is a necessary condition and foundation for practical use of English, no matter for oral English competence or English writing and reading ability. It is the responsibility of teachers to think such a question why students have little enthusiasm and weak interest in vocabulary course, and why the classroom atmosphere is dull instead of active and interactive. It is the task of teachers to design a vocabulary course with interesting content and interactive parts to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students' enthusiasm and interest.

Actually, in English vocabulary there are many interesting and meaningful phenomena, such as spoonerisms, oxymoron, malapropisms, palindrome, etc., which leave a "space" for language-learners to find out secret and surprise, and to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. They make the boring vocabulary lesson be changed into the interesting and interactive practical course, which is one of the sources of interest for students.

The author in this paper intends to give a brief introduction to one of these interesting linguistic phenomena, palindrome, including the definition, origin and function etc., for teachers to use for reference so as to make their course more vivid and effective.

Keywords: English words, vocabulary course, Palindrome, teaching methods

1. Introduction

When creating, famous writers like to use English words cleverly. For example, in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there is such oxymoronic words as follows:

*"A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth.
Merry and tragical! tedious and brief!
That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow."
How shall we find the concord of this discord?"*

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In this poem, “Merry and tragical”, “tedious and brief”, “hot ice”, “wondrous strange” and “the concord of this discord”, all of the collocations are contradictory and antonyms. Used together, those apparently contradictory words produce a special effect: to profoundly reveal the inner conflict and complex emotions of the speaker, which enhances the literariness of the poem.

There is a famous saying by Napoleon when he was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba, which is “Able was I ere I saw Elba”. The sentence is hard to translate, (in China some scholars translate it as “落败孤岛孤败落。”) because it is a palindrome, and just like oxymoron mentioned above, it is a kind of special English linguistic phenomenon. It can be read both forward and backward with the similar or different meaning. With a sense of rhythm and a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion, it makes sentence have not only denotative meaning but also abundant connotative meaning.

Famous persons has paid considerable attention to these special linguistic phenomena and put them into practice and therefore so should we do.

We should understand that being a master of words is one of the most important goal for language-learner, and teachers should realize that it is crucial and necessary to help students possess a big vocabulary. Unfortunately, the situation of English vocabulary course in China is not positive, for most of the students think the content is boring, the classroom atmosphere is dull and the process is not interactive. So it is time for teachers to try hard to design a vocabulary course with interesting content to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students’ enthusiasm and interest. Here below are many methods, some special and interesting linguistic phenomena in English, for teachers to guide their students to study and at the same time have fun with words, and they are: palindromes, spoonerisms, tongue Twister Fun, malapropisms and oxymoron, etc. And the author in this paper is mainly going to give a brief introduction to one of these interesting linguistic phenomena: Palindrome.

2. Definition and Origin of Palindrome

In accordance with the definition from Wikipedia, palindrome is a word or phrase which reads the same backward as forward, such as madam or racecar. Sentence-length palindromes may be written when allowances are made for adjustments to capital letters, punctuation, and word dividers, such as "A man, a plan, a canal, Panama!", "Was it a car or a cat I saw?". The word "palindrome" was coined by the English playwright Ben Jonson in the 17th century from the Greek Greek palíndromos, meaning running back again. ① Some well-known English palindromes are:

- Rise to vote, sir.
- Able was I ere I saw Elba
- Was it a rat I saw?
- Do geese see God?
- King, are you glad you are king?

3. The Classification of English Palindromes

3.1 Palindrome Word

Palindrome word, which means that the letters in a word can be read backwards or forwards, could be furtherly divided into three categories.

1) backwards or forwards with the same word

Put them in alphabetical order: aha, Bob, civic, dad, deed, deified, did, Eve, eve, eye, ewe, gig, kayak, level, madam, minim, mum, noon, nun, pip, peep, pop, pup, racecar, radar, redder, refer, reviver, repaper, rotator, sees, tat, tenet, tot, Wow

2) backwards or forwards with the different word

rats-star, bad-dab, deer-reed, dog-god, door-rood, draw-ward, keep-peek, live-evil, meet-teem, mood-doom, new-wen, not-ton, now-won, nut-tun, pan-nap, part-trap, pay-yap, pin-nip, pool-loop, reward-drawer, room-moor, step-pets, ten-net, time-emit, tip-pit, tool-loot, top-pot, tops-spot, was-saw, war-raw, wolf-flow, but-tub, put-tup, get-teg, got-tog, smart-trams, rat-tar, are-era^② and so on.

3.2 Palindrome Phrase

A rod, not a bar, a baton, Dora
a Santa at NASA

a Toyota

A war at Tarawa

3.3 Palindrome Sentence

In accordance with the Christian legend, when Adam and Eve first met, Adam said to her in palindrome: Madam, I'm Adam. Certainly, there are more Palindrome Sentences, such as: "Murder for a jar of red rum"; "Are we not drawn onwards, we Jews, drawn onward to new era?"

3.4 Palindrome Poem

Here a palindrome poem from Roger Scruton is introduced as an example:

Night, whispering to Morning, said:
"Have we death? Is life
Unlimited by prolonged persistence?"
"Birds have nest, as absurdity
Made new for long life"
Said Morning .Morning said:
"Life longs for new - made
Absurdity, as nests have birds -
Persistence prolonged by
Unlimited life is death;" we have said
Morning to whispering Night.

3.5 Palindrome Word Squares

Palindrome word square is a kind of form with some words, and in the form the letters in every row and column can be organized into a word in both directions. For example, the forms below are two palindrome word squares:

T	R	A	P
R	A	J	A
A	J	A	R
P	A	R	T

F	A	R	A	D
A	L	E	D	A
R	F	B	E	R
A	D	E	L	A
D	A	R	A	F

4. Comparison between English and Chinese Palindromes

4.1 Similarities

Palindrome is used both in English and Chinese. On one hand, there are many words in English that have the same form and meaning no matter when they are read forward or backward, such as rotor, civic, pop, madam, eye, nun, radar, toot etc. While in Chinese, the same linguistic phenomena is not rare too: 讲演--演讲、觉察--察觉、累积--积累、互相--相互、代替--替代、问询--询问、并吞--吞并、质朴--朴质、妒忌--忌妒、情感--感情、别离--离别、久远--远久、和平--平和、语言--言语、胆大--大胆、质变--变质^③.....and so on

On the other hand, English palindrome poem is similar with Chinese palindrome poem. For example, in St. Winwalloe' s Church there is an epitaph written there (Chen Xiangliang, 2003):

Shall we all die?
We shall die all
All die shall we-
Die all we shall.

In the Song dynasty of China, Songci was very developed, among which there were quite a few exquisite palindrome poems. For example, the famous poet Sushi's two pieces of "Remembering the Two Dreams" described the scene that Sushi dreamed when he was in the snow.

记梦二首（一）

酡颜玉碗捧纤纤， 乱点馀花唾碧衫。
歌咽水云凝静院， 梦惊松雪落空岩。

Palindrome poems

岩空落雪松惊梦， 院静凝云水咽歌；
衫碧唾花馀点乱， 纤纤捧碗玉颜酡。

记梦二首（二）

空花落尽酒倾缸， 日上山融雪涨江。
红焙浅瓿新火活， 龙团小碾斗晴窗。

Palindrome poems

窗晴斗碾小团龙， 活火新瓿浅焙红。
江涨雪融山上日， 漾倾酒尽落花空。

4.2 Differences

Both Chinese and English palindromes emphasize the linguistic aesthetic value, namely the "beauty of structure" of language, and make it possible to create a special linguistic effect by reading both forward and backward. But after all, Chinese and English are two different languages, and they belong to different language systems, so in the function of palindromes Chinese and English palindromes have their unique characteristics.

Chinese vocabulary can be divided into two types: (1) single-morpheme word, which is composed of one morpheme. (2) compound word, consisting of two or more morphemes.

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and is a typical analytic language, whose feature is to use word order instead of morphological changes, to express logical meaning and grammatical relations. In addition, Chinese monosyllabic words with flexible word structure (excluding function words) have a strong ability of phrase formation. Chinese palindrome can be read backward in the smallest unite (Chinese character), which is a special linguistic art form that English palindrome can never have -- palindrome of three-character and four-character idioms. (Ji Suna, 2009) For example, in ancient China there exists such traditional customary habits "fortune-telling", and there is a saying (three-Chinese-characters palindrome) in the custom "看一看、断一断、占一占、算一算"; and of course there are many four-Chinese-characters palindrome, such as "善者不辩,辩者不善" etc. These palindromes boast the beauty of sound and form and are rich in meaning. They are not only natural and modest, but also of rhythm and with a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion.

English palindromes are similar to Chinese ones, but English is an Indo-European language, and modern English belongs to synthetic-analytic language, paying attention to sentence pattern, complete structure and explicit meaning. English is characterized by frequently using morphological inflections, relatively fixed word order and abundant function words to express grammatical meaning and logical relations. Therefore, English palindromes also have what Chinese palindromes could never have: letters palindromes, such as "Palindrome Word Squares". Letters palindrome stresses the symmetry of the "letter form or order", which breaks the boundaries of morpheme and the integrity of the meaning of words. (Ji Suna, 2009) Letters palindrome is interesting and meaningful, such as "Straw? No, too stupid a fad; I put soot on warts" etc.

5. The Function and Meaning of Palindromes

5.1 Learning Value

First of all, palindromes is an interesting linguistic phenomenon. English palindromes make the word or sentence could be read forward and backward, sometimes with the same meaning and sometimes with the different or even totally opposite meaning, which leaves a "space" for readers and language-learners to find out its secret and surprise and this is one of the sources of interest for students to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. Palindrome puzzles, Palindrome Word Squares etc. makes the boring vocabulary lesson be changed into interesting and interactive practical course. It is because of the exquisite and unique creation and design

of palindromes that the study of words, which has been regarded as a kind of boring and tedious study, has become interesting.

5.2 Literary Value

"Literariness" is a relatively general and unspeakable connotation existing in the way of expression, including augmentation, narration, exploration and description. Then, palindrome has its literary value because it can increase the "literariness" of one's expression. English palindrome is of beauty and worthy of appreciation for readers. They are designed with great care, they are symmetric in form and rich in meaning, and they are of rhythm and with a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion. Therefore, English palindrome is actually a kind of figure of speech, which makes it have not only denotative meaning but also abundant connotative meaning.

5.3 Practical Value

Moreover, it attracts attention. Many English palindromes function as games. In fact, art, to some extent, has the function of games. The taste for word games is natural and universal for human beings. Palindrome can help us use words to create special mood and add interest. Ingenious word games and the skillful use of palindrome can create a kind of enjoyment for readers, which can not only better express emotions, but also create a better auditory and visual sense of beauty. (Wang Ke, 2002)

5.4 Heritage Value

To some extent, it's easy to remember. It is concise and beautiful language carefully designed by people, which is with symmetry, and rich sense of rhythm. Because English palindrome has a sense of rhythm, and is concise, it is good for readers to remember and to hand it down from generation to generation. A good case for the point is that some life experience in China is summarized by people in palindrome, and because it has such a characteristics "few words but rich meaning", it is easy to remember.

5.5 Religious Meaning

Palindrome originated from ancient Greece and Rome, and is an ancient figure of speech. The creation and use of palindromes are of quite religious significance. Both in Cirencester of England and Pompeii of Italy, the same English palindrome (palindrome word square or poem square) was found, written in Latin in the Roman era of 300 BC, created by poet Sotades in his own name. The meaning of this palindrome poem square is "Arco, the Sower holds the wheels with care", engraved on the amulet of the pregnant woman to ensure her safe delivery. (Liu Jingqiu, 2000)

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

The letters in the third column and the third row just form the same word: TENET, which means "belief", and meanwhile those letters just constitute a "cross", which is one of the three great symbols of Christianity (prayer, faith and cross). Moreover, around the circle all the letters are "AOOAAOOA", which actually has a religious connotation, meaning "I pray to thee, Father, Thou healest", a typical Christian prayer. (Liu Jingqiu, 2000)

6. Conclusion

In English vocabulary there are many interesting and meaningful phenomena, such as palindrome etc. It leaves a "space" for language-learners to find out secret and surprise, which is one of the sources of interest for students to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. As teachers we should realize that the traditional boring vocabulary lesson could be changed into the interesting and interactive practical course and it is the task of teachers to design a vocabulary course with interesting content and interactive parts to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students' enthusiasm and interest.

English palindrome is concise and beautiful language carefully designed by people, which is with symmetry, and rich sense of rhythm. Guiding students to have a study in such a special linguistic phenomenon can help them, on one

hand, to improve their sensitivity in vocabulary, and on the other hand, to detect the similarity and difference in aesthetic taste and linguistic expression between Chinese and West people.

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